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Two Poems

From Rhymes of a Red Cross Man

By ROBERT W. SERVICE

FOREWORD

*I've tinkered at my bits of rhymes
In weary, woeful, waiting times;
In doleful hours of battle din
Ere yet they brought the wounded in;
Through vigils of the fateful night
In lousy barns by candle-light;
In dugouts, sagging and aflood,
On stretchers stiff and bleared with blood;
By ragged grove, by ruined road,
By hearths accurst where Love abode;
By broken altars, blackened shrines
I've tinkered at my bits of rhymes.*

*I've solaced me with scraps of song
The desolated ways along,
Through sickly fields all shrapnel-sown
And meadows reaped by death alone;
By blazing cross and splintered spire,
By headless Virgin in the mire;
By gardens gashed amid their bloom,
By gutted grave, by shattered tomb;
Beside the dying and the dead
Where rocket green and rocket red*

*In trembling pools of poisoning light
With flowers of flame festoon the night.
Ah me! by what dark ways of wrong
I've cheered my heart with scraps of song!*

*So here's my sheaf of war-won verse
And some is bad and some worse;
And if at times I curse a bit
You needn't read that part of it;
For through it all like horror runs
The red resentment of the guns.
And you yourself would mutter when
You took the things that once were men
And sped them through that zone of hate
To where the dripping surgeons wait
And wonder too if in God's sight
War ever, ever can be right.*

*Yet may it not be, crime and war
But effort misdirected are?
And if there's good in war and crime
There may be in my bits of rhyme,
My songs from out the slaughter mill—
So take or leave them as you will!*

BILL THE BOMBER

THE poppies gleamed like bloody pools
through cotton-woolly mist;
The Captain kept a-lookin' at the watch
upon his wrist;
And there we smoked and squatted as we
watched the shrapnel flame;
'Twas wonderfull, I'm tellin' you, how fast
them bullets came.
'Twas weary work the waiting, though; I
tried to sleep a wink,
For waitin' means a-thinkin', and it doesn't do
to think.
So I closed my eyes a little, and I had a niceish
dream
Of a-standin' by a dresser with a dish of
Devon cream;
But I hadn't time to sample it, for suddenlike
I woke;
"Come on, me lads!" the Captain says, 'n I
climbed out through the smoke.

.....
We spread out in the open; it was like a bath
of lead;
But the boys they cheered and hollered fit to
raise the bloody dead,
Till a beastly bullet copped 'em, then they
lay without a sound,
And it's odd—we didn't seem to heed them
corpses on the ground.

An' I kept on thinkin', thinkin' as the bullets
faster flew
How they picks the werry best men and they
lets the rotters through;
So indiscriminatin'-like they spares a man
of sin
And a rare lad wot's a husband and a father
gets done in.
And while havin' these reflections and ad-
vancin' on the run
A bullet biffs me shoulder and says I: "That's
number one."

.....
Well, it downed me for a jiffy, but I didn't lose
me calm
For I knew that I was needed: I'm a bomber,
so I am.
I 'ad lost me cap and rifle, but I "carried on"
because
I'd me bunch o' bombs and knew that they was
needed, so they was.
We didn't 'ave no singin' now, nor many men
to cheer;
Maybe the shrapnel drowned 'em, crashin' out
so werry near;
And the Maxims got us sideways and the
bullets faster flew
And I copped one on me flipper, and says I:
"That's number two."

I was pleased it was the left one, for I 'ad
me bombs, ye see,
And 'twas 'ard if they'd be wasted like, and
all along o' me.
And I'd lost me 'at and rifle—but I told you
that before,
So I packed me mitt inside me coat and "car-
ried on" once more.
But the rumpus it was wicked, and the men
were scarcer yet
And I felt me ginger goin', but me jaws I
kindo set,
And we passed the Boche first trenches, which
was 'eapin' 'igh with dead,
And we started for their second, which was
fifty feet ahead;
When something like a 'ammer smashed me
savage on the knee
And down I came all muck and blood: Says I:
"That's number three."

.

So there I lay all 'elpless like, and bloody sick
at that,
And worryin' like anything, because I'd lost
me 'at;
And thinkin' of me missis and the partin'
words she said:
"If you gets killed, write quick, ol' man, and
tell me as you're dead."
And lookin' at me bunch o' bombs—that was
the 'ardest blow
To think I'd never 'ave the chance to 'url them
at the foe.
And there was all our boys in front a-fightin'
there like mad
And me as could 'ave 'elped 'em wiv the lovely
bombs I 'ad.
And so I cussed and cussed and then—I
struggled back again
Into that bit of battered trench, packed solid
with its slain.

.

Now as I lay a-lyin' there and blarstin' of me
lot
And wishin' I could just dispose of all them
bombs I'd got
I see within the doorway of a shy, retirin'
dugout
Six Boches all a-grinnin' and their Captain
stuck 'is mug out;

And they 'ad a nice machine gun, and I
twigged what they was at;
And they fixed it on a tripod and I watched
'em like a cat;
And they got it in position and they seemed
so werry glad
Like they'd got us in a death-trap, which,
condemn their souls! they 'ad—
For there our boys was fightin' fifty yards
in front and 'ere
This lousy bunch of Boches they 'ad got us in
the rear.

.

Oh, it set me blood a-boilin' and I quite forgot
me pain,
So I started crawlin', crawlin' over all them
mounds of slain;
And them barstards was so busy like they
'ad no eyes for me,
An' me bleedin' leg was draggin', but me right
arm it was free:
An' now they 'ave it all in shape and swingin'
sweet and clear;
An' now they're all excited like, but—I am
drawin' near,
An' now they 'ave it loaded up and now
they're takin' aim:
Rat-tat-tat-tat! Oh, here, says I, is where I
join the game!
An' me right arm it goes swingin' and a
bomb it goes a-slingin'
And that "typewriter" goes wingin' in a
thunderbolt of flame.

.

Then these Boches, wot was left of 'em, they
tumbled down their 'ole
And up I climbed a mound of dead and down
on them I stole
And, oh, that blessed moment when I heard
their frightened yell
And I laughed down in that dugout ere I
bombed their souls to hell. . . .
And now I'm in the orspital, surprised that
I'm alive:
We started out a thousand men, we came back
thirty-five;
An' I'm minus of a trotter, but I'm most
amazin' gay
For me bombs they wasn't wasted, though you
might say "thrown away."



"An' my right arm it goes swingin' and a bomb it goes a-slingin'"

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